

Transformative Justice

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First Parish in Brookline

If you could choose either to a) talk about the gross injustice of extreme poverty and world hunger, or b) actively work to end poverty and world hunger in your lifetime, which would bring our community greater joy? Where are our priorities today? What portion of our resources do we owe those most in need, even if we have somewhat less for ourselves and our children by giving it? I called this sermon “Transformative Justice” because it will explore these difficult questions about what it means to live a morally good life. Much of it is based upon “The Life You Can Save,” a new book by Princeton University bioethics professor Peter Singer. Singer suggests: “that it may not be possible to consider ourselves to be living a morally good life unless we give a great deal more than most of us would think is realistic to expect human beings to give.” This argument is not new with Singer, it is central to all the world’s great religions, but is seldom taken seriously by the religious.

We all know that when Jesus was asked by a lawyer how to inherit eternal life, Jesus responded with the story of the Good Samaritan. And when a rich young man wanted to know what he must do beyond keeping the commandments, Jesus said, “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.” So Jesus, at least as recorded in the Gospels, was very clear, if you wish to follow a path to salvation, you will feed the hungry, provide clean water for those who thirst, cloth the naked, and welcome every stranger as if a member of your own family. The Bible contains three thousand references to alleviating poverty, which you might think would make this the central moral cause for all Christians. Of course the Hebrew word for charity, *tzedakah*, literally means justice, which suggests that feeding the poor is not just a nice *mitzvah*, but rather an essential criteria for being a *mensch*, a fully human being. The Talmud says that the obligation to give to those in need is equal in importance to all the other commandments combined, and good Jews should give at least 10% of their income as *tzedakah*. Islam, on the other hand, doesn’t focus so much on income as it does on household wealth. Good Muslims must give 2.5% of their household wealth each year to help those in greater need.

So why are we lifting up this ancient admonition today? Two reasons: first because poverty kills, and second because for the first time in the history of the world we may be able to end it. Professor Singer tells us that “The 1.4 billion people living in extreme poverty are poor by an absolute standard tied to the most basic human needs. They are likely to be hungry for at least part of each year. Even if they can get enough food to fill their stomachs, they will probably be malnourished because their diet lacks essential nutrients. In children, malnutrition stunts growth

and can cause permanent brain damage. The poor may not be able to afford to send their children to school. Even minimal health care services are usually beyond their means. This kind of poverty kills. Life expectancy in rich nations averages 78 years; in the poorest nations, those officially classified as 'least developed', it is below 50. In rich countries, fewer than one in a 100 children die before the age of five; in the poorest countries, one in five does. And to the UNICEF figure of nearly 10 million young children dying every year from avoidable, poverty-related causes, we must add at least another 8 million older children and adults." Feeding the poor is literally a matter of life and death for them!

Yet Professor Singer suggests there is reason to not despair. He writes, "We live in a unique moment. The proportion of people unable to meet their basic physical needs is smaller today than it has been at any time in recent history, and perhaps at any time since humans first came into existence. At the same time, when we take a long-term perspective that sees beyond the fluctuations of the economic cycle, the proportion of people with far more than they need is also unprecedented. Most important, rich and poor are now linked in ways they never were before. Moving images, in real time, of people on the edge of survival are beamed into our living rooms. Not only do we know a lot about the desperately poor, but we also have more to offer them in terms of health care, improved seeds and agricultural techniques, and new technologies for generating electricity. More amazing, through instant communications and open access to a wealth of information that surpasses the greatest libraries of the pre-Internet age, we can enable them to join the world community—if only we can help them get far enough out of poverty to seize the opportunity." This generation can end world hunger and extreme poverty now.

Yet we continue to do otherwise. I want to encourage this congregation to become part of the solution, for I feel we can collectively help to begin to end death by hunger in our time. This is social justice and also a transformative moral obligation. Professor Singer points out that 2/3 of the greenhouse gases now in the Earth's atmosphere have been produced by the United States and Western Europe, yet world climate change disproportionately impoverishes the world's poorest people. Total food production now represents only 4% of US GDP but in countries like Malawi 90% of the population are subsistence farmers dependent upon annual rainfall in order to survive. Professor Singer says, "If we accept that those who harm others must compensate them, we cannot deny that the industrialized nations owe compensation to many of the world's poorest people." Yet, the United States ranks near the bottom of industrialized nations in terms of proportion of national income given as foreign aid. We can begin to do much better.

Albert Nolan, a Dominican Catholic priest serving the poor in South Africa, says that for him our spiritual development is tied to serving the poor. He defines four stages of spiritual growth as faith communities grow in their understanding of their faith. He says the first stage is characterized by compassion, which is being able to empathize and share in the suffering of the poor. For this he recommends more information, as well as personal exposure, to help us better

understand the suffering endured. He says, “The second stage begins with the gradual discovery that poverty is a structural problem. Poverty in the world today is not simply misfortune, not inevitable, nor due to laziness or ignorance or a lack of development. Poverty today is the direct result of the political and economic policies of governments and big business.” The fishermen of Senegal, in West Africa, can no longer catch enough fish to feed their families, because large European fishing fleets have already harvested all the fish.

A European Commission report concluded that as the cost of fish declined in Europe, due to success of these large industrial fishing fleets, as a result Africa has sunk deeper into hunger and poverty. The wealth and poverty of nations are not unrelated. Exxon Mobil has entered into long term oil contracts with Teodoro Obiang, the dictator of tiny Equatorial Guinea, which provided Exxon Mobil billions of dollars in profits, has made the dictator one of the world’s wealthiest men, and yet left his country in extreme poverty. Mr. Obiang owns six private jets, a \$35 million house in Malibu, CA, and a fleet of Lamborghinis, Ferraris and Bentleys. Most people in his country live in extreme poverty, with infant mortality rates of 87 per 1,000 born each year, and an average life expectancy of only 49 years. Professor Singer tells us that “Equatorial Guinea is an extreme case, but other examples are almost as bad... In 2006, Angola made more than \$30 billion in oil revenue, about \$2,500 for each of its 12 million citizens. Yet the majority of Angolans have no access to basic health care; life expectancy is 41 years; and 1 child in 4 dies before reaching the age of five. On Transparency International’s corruption monitoring index, Angola is currently ranked 147th among all 180 countries.”

Father Nolan says “the third stage of our spiritual development begins with yet another discovery. It begins with the discovery the poor must save themselves, and that they will do so, and don’t need you or me to do it for them. Spiritually, it is the stage when we come to grips with humility in our service to the poor.” We cannot solve the problems of the poor, they must be allowed to do so for themselves, however we can help them to survive while they do so, and help to provide them with resources for their own emergence into financial wellbeing, even while we work to end the structural impediments, from both corrupt political and big business enterprises, which have made their circumstances become so desperate. We need to provide our neighbors with resources to empower their own emergence, and stop developed nations from exploiting them. This is our work that we can do in solidarity with the poor. Father Nolan cautions however “the fourth and final stage of our spiritual development begins with a crisis of disillusionment and disappointment with the poor. It begins with the discovery that many poor and oppressed people do have faults, do commit sins, do make mistakes, do fail us and let us down, or rather fail themselves and sometimes spoil their own cause.” The United States has a long history of using its foreign aid, as little as we do give, for our own political or economic purposes. Our foreign aid dollars are used to buy American surplus crops, and then pay to ship them halfway around the world on American ships, when buying that same food locally would provide ten times as much actual food aid to a developing country while helping to build up their

own agricultural sector. We strike deals with local dictators and oligarchies, which enrich our international corporations while impoverishing the local population. Developed countries become richer at the expense of the poor then blame them for their circumstances.

It doesn't have to be that way. Reasonable world prosperity, measured by the World Bank as greater than \$1.25 per person per day, is within reach in our lifetime. Last year total world GDP was \$44.7 billion, and total world population was about 6.5 billion people, so average daily world GDP is already \$18.84 per day, or if it was evenly distributed about 15X the level needed to lift everyone in the world out of extreme poverty. Now world income never has been, nor likely ever will be evenly distributed, and probably never should be, for a variety of very good reasons, but nevertheless the resources are there to end extreme poverty in our lifetimes without impoverishing ourselves in doing so. We can begin with our own spiritual growth. At least 15 of us participated in the Walk for Hunger this morning. Others will come together here next Saturday, for our second MAD (Making a Difference) Saturday, cooking food for our own FP families in need, learning about other local food related programs, and sorting the canned goods for the Brookline Food Pantry. You can help to make a difference! Charity rightly begins in our own community, and our neighborhood, but then we should reach beyond. Some of us will find our own ways to walk in solidarity with the world's poor, perhaps by changing our living habits in ways that make their lives more possible. Perhaps your mail carriers have told you that they will participate in the nation's largest one day food drive this coming week? For Brookline any food collected will be brought to the Brookline Food Pantry and will be sorted on Saturday afternoon by FPB volunteers. We have included suggested items for you to donate there in your pews and we hope to build a wall of food in the rear of our sanctuary during the month of May. And we will take a special collection today immediately following the sermon to help fund the UUUM's Renewal House and provide food to the world through UNICEF.

So if I haven't already challenged you enough, then remember I believe that we can still do more. I believe that giving away a tenth of all we receive (a spiritual practice known as tithing) helps each of us live a life of integrity and abundance. Loretta and I have more or less followed this practice every year for the 30 years of our married life. Now UUs don't ask, like some faith communities I could name, for us to give all this money to our congregation. UUs believe in 1/4 tithe, 2.5%, for the work of our faith community, and Loretta and I split our 1/4 tithe between two congregations, FPC and FPB, as well as the UUA. If you haven't yet pledged for next year, or if you pledged less than 2.5% of your income, you may wish (for your own spiritual health) to go find a pledge form and do so, it is never too late. But the bigger question is what to do with the other 3/4 of a tithe that you have available to empower new spiritual development throughout this interconnected world of ours. You might want to take one 2.5% and invest it towards ending climate change, before we destroy this planet that we live upon. And one 2.5% might go towards some special need in our local community or wider world that you particularly want to help to support now. But I would suggest that even so we each reach deep into our checkbooks and

commit 2.5% of our income going forward to helping to end world hunger. Professor Singer suggests that if on average the 15% of the world's population living in the richest economies, which earn 52% of the world's wealth, were to contribute as little as 1% of their annual incomes to ending extreme poverty in the world, this \$230 billion could lift everyone in the world out of desperate poverty without making a noticeable impact on the overall wealth of the rich countries.

So I may have told you, our Social Justice community has asked that we take a special offering following today's sermon. You should let your heart be your guide to where your own spiritual development may lead you. But as a form of encouragement, whatever you give in today's special offering to help end world hunger, Loretta and I will match it dollar for dollar, up to a maximum of \$2,500 in total, to encourage you to open your hearts to the needs of our neighbors in distant lands. Because ending world hunger is possible in our lifetime, and working towards it together should be as transformative for us as it will be for those who receive the gifts we have to give. I love you all dearly. Blessed Be and Amen.